

Cameron and Britain's Muslim Women

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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British Prime Minister David Cameron is all pent up about another crusade, this time about rescuing Muslim women. The latest idea is a £20m language-learning scheme suggesting that a lack of competence in English and extremism are somehow linked. (The PM has obviously not been keeping up with the radical recruits for ISIS.)

Women are the primary focus, with Cameron claiming that 190,000 British Muslim women, or 22 percent, speak little or no English. Muslim men were ever in the background spreading “backward attitudes” and exercising “damaging control” over their female relatives.[1] Such a view prompted Baroness Sayeeda Warsi to make the point that, “Women should have the opportunity to learn English full stop. Why link it to radicalisation/extremism?”[2]

Western advocates from various parts of the political spectrum simply cannot leave them alone. Liberating the down trodden Muslim woman is a condition of Western consciousness, one of those obsessive imperatives that occupies mission and purpose. Cameron’s funding policy provides, as Madeleine Bunting scoffed, “a new twist on an old colonial story.”[3]

From a political perspective, Islamic women make excellent public relations opportunities, equipping the messianically inclined with gendered themes for liberation that can be slotted in for the next invasion, or reform program. They supply the basis for purported change as capably as any lethal weapon.

The US First Lady Laura Bush chose to do exactly that on November 17, 2001. The country was giddy with war fervour a few months after the attacks on US soil by al-Qaeda, and the flag of emancipation had been woven. Taliban-governed Afghanistan was the first choice, obvious only because of some flexible reasoning on the part of the White House. “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan,” suggested the First Lady, “women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment.”

The radio address had one overarching tendency: obliterating concepts, mashing terms. The Taliban and terrorists became, as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod noted, “a kind of hyphenated monster identity”.[4] And this was not all. Women’s causes were bound together with the broader mission against the Taliban, be it malnutrition, poverty, and ill-health on the one hand, and their employment, schooling and “joys of wearing nail polish” on the other. As Laura Bush explained, “The fight against terrorism is also the fight for the rights and dignity of women.”

This appropriated theme – whether Muslim women need saving – is an old one indeed. It tends to bubble to the surface as a matter of strategic interest rather than genuine concern,

though there is little doubt that some people have believed it. When the Taliban was in the US State Department's good books, and the treasury was readily forking out to the theocratic opium opportunists, down trodden women, segregation, and limited schooling, were of little interest.

Such precedents of manipulation stack the annals of misguided history. Sociologist Marnia Lazreg had also noted that French colonialism made use of women towards such ends. Muslim women were unveiled in choreographed ceremonies, one which took place on May 16, 1958 in Algeria. The event had been organised by French generals steadfastly opposed to the country's liberation, a spectacle which involved a few thousand local men been taken by bus from nearby villages, and various women set for the unveiling. They were suitable bodies, strategically used and deployed in the broader story about French freedom.

Afghanistan provided a similar battleground five decades later. The US Central Intelligence Agency's public relations boffins felt that oppressed women in the Islamic faith would provide excellent material for the US-led cause. WikiLeaks, ever useful, provided material to that end. A classified document shows that, when interest in Afghanistan was flagging in 2010 on the part of various contributing countries, notably France and Germany, the motif of oppressed women would come to the rescue. This was particularly the case with France.

The CIA Red Cell memorandum ("Sustaining West European Support for the NATO-led Mission - Why Counting on Apathy Might Not Be Enough", 11 March 2010), stemming from a section charged by the Director to "provoke out-of-the-box" approaches, is a deliciously cynical piece of advice.[5]

Far from being out-of-the-box, the memorandum is distinctly within it, noting how leaders have used public apathy "to ignore voters" and drive up commitments to the conflict. French and German respondents did not see Afghanistan as necessarily a primary issue; politicians had capitalised, sending more troops and supplies to the ISAF mission. For all that, "Casualties Could Precipitate Backlash."

The response, then, would be to massage, or "leverage" guilt, noting the "adverse consequences of an ISAF defeat for Afghan civilians" to French (and other European) states. Girl's education, for instance, "could provoke French indignation, and become a rallying point for France's largely secular public".

The authors of the memorandum make the blatant suggestion that, "Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women's inability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory." Media opportunities would be made available for articulating the cause.

This was bound to smack of imperialist reflection - noble native women, incapable of articulating their plight, used to idealise an invasion against obscurantist forces. It ended up playing out what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would suggest during a moment of unusual coherence in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?": a story of white men saving brown women from brown men.[6]

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes:

[1]

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jan/21/davids-cameron-will-support-muslim-women-but-only-when-it-suits-his-scaremongering-narrative>

[2] <https://twitter.com/SayeedaWarsi/status/688868105339166720>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/22/david-cameron-muslim-women>

[4] <http://org.uib.no/smi/seminars/Pensum/Abu-Lughod.pdf>

[5] <https://file.wikileaks.org/file/cia-afghanistan.pdf>

[6] http://www.uky.edu/~tmute2/geography_methods/readingPDFs/spivak.pdf

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